Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XXXII

Sam Seward
Washington County

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Extension Service,
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The Sam Seward home near Independence, built over 100 years ago and still standing.

"SEIZE the opportunities of the present day," might have been Sam Seward's motto after October 19, 1816, when he and Ann Stewart Seward returned to Illinois from across the state line into Ohio where they had been married.

Ann and her aunt were picking berries. That is, her aunt thought they had gone out to pick berries. And Ann was really trying, but she knew that Sam Seward was coming in a little while. As he came riding by she rushed out to meet him. Almost before Ann's auntie was aware of what was happening Ann had thrown her bonnet over her shoulder to her aunt and said, "Sam and I are on our way to be married."

Upon their return they set up housekeeping on Sam's land on which later the town of Quincy, Illinois, was established.

Sam Seward loved growing things and he loved land. He wanted to own many cattle and he wanted to farm on a big scale. Slave labor was the only labor of sufficient volume at that time for the promotion of either, but negroes did not do so well in the cooler climate of Illinois. Then, too, Sam Seward was a pioneer at heart. As the years went by he listened intently to the stories of the great opportunities that were reported to be in the province of Texas.

To be sure Texas was still under the yoke of Mexico. But there were already plenty of people there who were ready to fight for freedom when the time came.

He and Ann spent much time discussing how to acquire a competence for their later years, and to give their children an opportunity to enjoy it.

Sam made a trip on horseback into Texas in 1828. Here he decided were the answers to the questions he and Ann had been asking since the wedding day nearly twelve years before. In Illinois crops had to be made and harvested in about half of the year. But, in South Texas he found that there was rarely a month during the year when the farmers could not plow, sow or plant. They hardly more than got through picking cotton, gathering corn and other crops before it was time to begin plowing to start a new crop. Slaves could be kept busy throughout the year. Mr. Seward could close his eyes and see great fields of cotton yielding more than a bale to the acre on land then untouched by the plow.

Native grasses were two and three feet high. There was an abundance of water in the rivers and creeks. The cattle, horses, mules, sheep and hogs could rustle for themselves on open range most of the year.

Wood and water for home use were prime necessities. Sam Seward accepted a labor of land in order to have access to an everlasting supply of water from the Brazos River, and bought 1,600 acres of land on the prairie in the edge of the Brazos River bottom, in the Cole Settlement, now known as Independence. Then he returned to Illinois to "sell out" and move to Texas.

Get Start to Texas

Finally in 1832 they started. Slowly they came, passing through strange lands, crossing streams, sometimes fording them and sometimes by ferry. Sam Seward was driving the big covered wagon loaded with household goods and Mrs. Seward and the children were in the "carry all."

John and George, age 10 and 8 years respectively, took in everything. They asked numberless questions about the woods and the birds. They enjoyed camping out, the camp fire where the bread was baked in the skillet and lid, and the bacon fried, and sleeping under the stars. Usually they were so tired they went to sleep soon after supper. Mrs. Seward was always looking for Indians. Some did follow them a few times. But Mr. Seward had met Indians in Texas, and he was not afraid of them.

One night they were sitting around the camp fire talking and enjoying the quiet and beauty of the evening. Little George had fallen asleep. Someone exclaimed, "Look! What is that?" All the stars appeared to "shoot" at one time, then came down in showers. It was a scene they never forgot. That "shower of stars" proved to be a source of wonder and much speculation throughout the country. The negroes and superstitious whites never could quite figure out just what the falling stars were "a sign of." But, they were sure it was a bad omen of something terrible. George never forgave them for not waking him so he could see the "shower of stars."

They finally arrived in the Cole Settlement on a warm, balmy Christmas Eve day. The grass and the live oaks were beautiful to every member of the Seward family. Green grass and trees with leaves on them at Christmas time were unheard of back in Illinois. The children began exploring immediately. John performed the greatest feat of all by burning a hole through a hat with a sunglass.

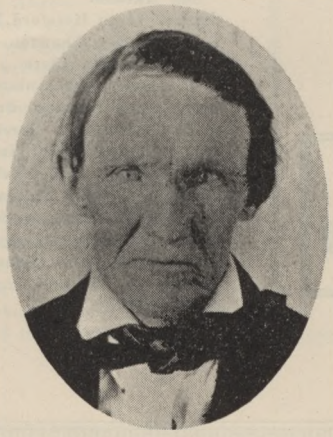
The Seward family moved into the one-room log cabin on the place. They enclosed the front porch in a wagon sheet for the boy's bedroom. Living in the little cabin and the great outdoors was a lark for the children. The deer, wild turkeys, razorbacks, and the Texas Longhorns both fascinated and frightened them. Soon each of the boys had his own horse.

Mrs. Seward kept house in the cabin while the new home was being built. Cedar logs were cut from trees in sight of the house on their own land. They were hand hewn by slave labor. Eventually—over a period of a few years—eight rooms were built. At first though, they built only two rooms with a big hall between. So many things had to be done. Land had to be broken, grain and corn had to be planted. Whenever there was a lull in the work Mr. Seward took the slaves to the near-by cedars where they cut the logs and hewed them with a whipsaw, and built another room on the house. One day while Mr. Seward and the slaves were cutting cedars George came rushing down.

"Come quick!" he begged. "There are the funniest little people sitting on the fence."

It proved to be a group of wise looking little owls. And as they came near the owls turned their heads toward them in the most human way.

MRS. ANN STEWART SEWARD



SAM SEWARD

The trips the boys enjoyed most with their father were when they took the cattle farther west to sell them. Though most of them were sold to local buyers, some were sold in Mexico. Then, too, there were the long trips to Houston to buy supplies. These trips were made in wagons drawn by longhorned oxen. The wagons had wooden axles which had to be greased with a mixture of tar and tallow. A supply of this preparation was kept in a grease box suspended from a coupling pole. While there were nearly always some other men along George and John felt important if they were allowed to help with some of the chores.

Though long and tiring, these occasional trips were great events in the boys' lives. They traveled slowly making four to eight miles a day, camping where there was plenty of water and good grazing for the cattle. If it rained the prairies were nearly impassable.

Mr. Seward usually traded with Mr. House (father of the late Col. E. M. House and a personal friend of Sam Seward's) in Houston. On one occasion when John had the coveted honor of going with his father, he walked into Mr. House's store with a great air of assurance.

"Give me a dollar's worth of that candy," he said as he proudly threw his dollar on the counter, and pointed to the rock candy.

It amused Mr. House so much that he just gave John the candy. Young John was determined to spend his money, so he walked down the street looking for something else to buy.

"Give me that pair of spurs," was his next demand. Then he walked on down the street to the sound of clanking spurs.

Buys Good Rock Mason

Sam Seward bought slaves with a view to their fitness for certain kinds of work. For instance, he paid $5,000 for a negro slave called "Fin" because he was an excellent rock mason. Fin laid the rocks for the foundation of the house and built the chimneys that are still standing straight and strong although the house has been built more than 100 years.

The rocks were quarried from the hillsides by the other slaves. Fin built all the chimneys for the house and the slave quarters, the rock cistern, and the big rock kitchen. He also built a rock furnace, using three big slabs by placing one slab on two upright ones. Fruit was dried by spreading it out on the top rock and building a slow fire underneath. Fin also laid the rock walk in the back yard from the dining room to the rock kitchen. This was much appreciated by the slaves who worked in the kitchen because they could walk on the rocks instead of in mud when bringing the food to the dining room during muddy weather.

Five thousand dollars was a lot of money to pay for a slave. However, Sam Seward thought Fin would pay for himself with his labor as a rock mason. He did work of that kind all over that section of the State. Even during the Civil War Fin had a pass to go anywhere he wanted to go. He was considered one of the best rock masons in the country. Mr. Seward would contract him to do a piece of work. "Old Fin" would do the work and go on to another job or return home, according to instructions. Perhaps a year later Mr. Seward would collect for his work when he was passing through that section.

As more land was put into cultivation Mr. Seward bought more slaves. More houses were built in the slave quarters to house them.

One day Mr. Seward came back from Alabama with a negro woman and her two daughters—"Marg" and her smaller sister. (Margaret—one of the slave's daughters—now ninety-five years old, and who provided some of the information for this story, remembers when they came.)

"I've brought you some help," Sam Seward told his wife.

The two slave girls grew up waiting on the Seward children. And as they grew older Margaret, also affectionately known as "Marg," drove the carriage for "Miss Betty and Miss Louise."

"Marse Sam fixed the roof of our house so it didn't leak a drop," was their proud boast. "It's jes' like white folks' house."

The negroes liked whiskey, which Mr. Seward kept locked in the cellar. But they knew how to manage to get some occasionally. They would beat the mules so as to make Mr. Seward mad enough to "cuss 'em." Then the negroes would cry. Because he was sorry he had cussed them so hard, Mr. Seward would give them a drink.

Everything possible was produced at home and was put up for winter. One of Mrs. Seward's favorites was "brandied peaches." Jelly was made in large quantities as soon as the orchard began to bear.

Lye was made by the drip method from the ash hopper. All their soap was made at home.

Mrs. Seward was an organizer. She trained each slave to do a special duty, then assigned that work to her. Some of the slaves worked in the garden. Another scoured wool, carded the wool and cotton into bats. Another had charge of the weaving of cloth for the slaves, cloth for the men's work clothing and weaving the carpets and lovely woolen coverlets, while another served as nurse for the Seward children. Some were trained seamstresses. Mrs. Seward and her girls knitted socks and stockings. The slaves knitted for themselves. The geese had to be picked carefully and the feathers were used in making large feather beds. These soft as down were placed over mattresses. The latter were made of cotton carded into bats and placed into ticks in smooth even layers, then tacked with needles made from the staves of an umbrella. If the mattresses were not to be used under the feather beds they used a layer

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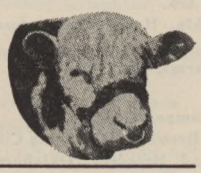

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of cotton and a layer of "hacked shucks" to keep it from knotting and packing and did not tack it. Mattresses were also made for the slaves.

When one of their slaves married a neighbor's slave, the Sewards worked out a system so they could have a home together. "Marg" married a slave belonging to the Haines family. Her husband spent Wednesday and Saturday night and Sunday in their cabin in the quarters for the Seward slaves. They married on the porch of the Seward home, then went to the slave quarters where refreshments were served and the negroes danced most of the night.

Christmas was a great occasion for the Seward household. No one, neither white nor black, was allowed to work the entire week except to do the necessary chores.

"Get all the work done," would be Mr. Seward's order about a week before Christmas. "Be sure there is plenty of wood chopped and piled on the porch. Nobody is going to work during Christmas."

And how they worked during that week! Numerous cakes and pies were baked. Hams and turkeys were baked. Sometimes they roasted a pig. And after the Sewards had their Christmas dinner they "took dinner" with their friends.

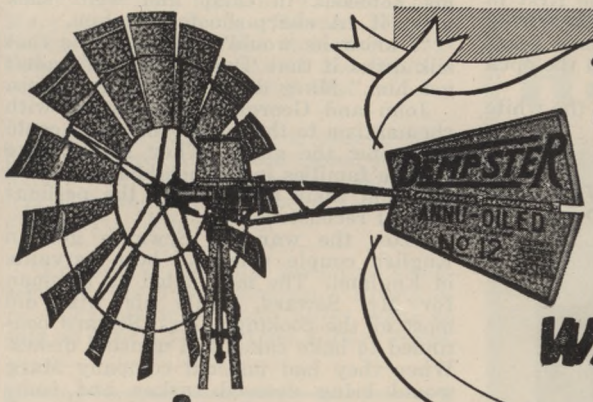
On Christmas morning every member of the Seward family and every slave on the place assembled in the parlor around a huge cedar Christmas tree, beautifully decorated. Each slave was presented a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Seward.

George Seward, when quite a young man, went to California to get "rich" in the gold mines. Because of the danger from attacks by the Indians and other outlaws, and partly because he really wanted to, he went by the Isthmus of Panama. It was a great trip but he did not find the opportunities for getting rich quickly. He only stayed a little while and came home near Christmas time, and on that Christmas he gave each of the slaves ten dollars.

In "Runaway Scrape"

The Seward home was a busy, happy place. But, before their house was finished independence from Mexico was declared. John was ordered to help care for the women and children in the famous "Runaway Scrape," and so missed being in the battle of San Jacinto. Just before the Sewards left home before the advance of General Santa Anna's army they dug a hole in the garden, buried the silver, china, and other valuables, leveled the ground and drove the wagons over it. Then they joined other families who were fleeing for safety from the Mexican army. When they heard the joyful news of General Sam Houston's victory at San Jacinto, they started back home. The Trinity River was high and they were a long while getting across. While they waited, they wondered with anxious heart if they had a home, or just land. Slowly they came fording the streams and crossing muddy prairies. Finally they arrived to find their house still standing and nearly everything as they left it.

After more land was cleared and put into cultivation, Sam Seward built a gin in front of the house. It was operated by horse or mule power. The Seward mules were usually "broke" by working them at the gin. Two bales of cotton could be ginned each day if they started early and worked late. The seed had to be moved or burned because they thought they were poisoned. A blacksmith shop was also operated. All this work was performed by slave labor.



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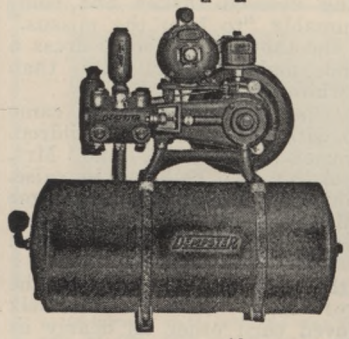

Above: Shallow Well Water System

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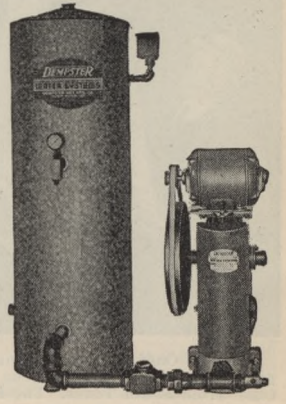

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While Mr. Seward was busy directing the farming activities and caring for his increasing cattle, Mrs. Seward was equally as busy in the home. She was a good manager and enjoyed her part. Though the Indians never really hurt her she was always afraid of them. The first time they came when Mr. Seward was away from home, Mrs. Seward was making cookies. She motioned for them to eat some. After that, the Indians came often. Another time curly headed Isabella was playing on the front porch when an Indian in all of his war paint jumped upon the porch and began dancing. Seeing her curls he reached in his pouch and pulled out a little girl's scalp with curly hair. Mr. Seward happened to come to the house about that time and found that the Indian was only dancing for corn.

While the Indians were friendly, Mr. Seward was uneasy when he was away from home. There were dogs but he was afraid they might not be ferocious enough to protect his family. One night when Mrs. Seward was in the house alone with her children the dogs began to bark. She put out the light and told the children to get under the bed quietly. Peeping through a window she saw a man wrapped in a blanket. She knew it was an Indian. With her baby in her arms she started to slip under the bed with her children, but the baby hit his little head on the bed rail and began crying. The blanketed Indian made a dash for the house, throwing his blanket off as he came. There was a good deal of relief when they realized it was Mr. Seward. He was trying to scare the dogs to make them more ferocious, consequently better protectors for his family.

There was plenty of wild game. Hunting was great sport for the boys and it kept the family supplied with meat. The big log smokehouse was kept supplied with big cans of lard and smoked hams and bacons hung from the rafters. Quantities of home dried fruit were stored away and used generously. Wild plum juice was put up and jelly was made when needed.

The favorite company dishes were boiled custard, cakes and jellies. The children thought the greatest treat was "corn light bread." Meal was mixed with molasses and yeast cake and cooked in the Dutch oven or "skillet and lid" before the open fireplace.

Flour and salt had to be brought from Houston. Sometimes it was hard to make the flour last from one trip to the next. The children would beg Mrs. Seward not to sift the flour so as to make it last longer. Occasionally the breast of a wild turkey was baked very dry and used as a substitute for bread.

Each Had Own Job

The older children attended a country school and later went to Baylor University. The girls took music. The Seward home was noted for its hospitality and it was easy for them to entertain. Many of the former slaves continued to work for "my white folks" after they were freed. Even the young negroes had special jobs. One shined the boots and shoes in addition to his regular duties. There were no screens, so one little negro pulled the string that kept the big "fly flopper" moving back and forth over the big dining table.

As each new room was built handsome walnut furniture was placed in it. Hand-woven carpets of "hit and miss patterns" were used on the floors of the bed rooms, and handsome Brussels carpets were used on the floor of the parlor and the guest bedroom upstairs. Rich lace curtains adorned the windows.

The Sewards were among the first in that section to buy a stove and a sewing machine. All the cooking for many years after the Civil War was done on the open fireplace.

The first time "Marg" heard the white women mention a cook stove she did not know what they were talking about. "But I wu'ked on an' sed nuthin' cause I didn't want 'em to know I didn't know," she said. The negroes did not like the stoves and continued to cook over the fireplace for many years.

The Sewards gave dinners and dances. When they wanted to give a dance they gave a negro the meat to butcher a cow, then sold the hide for twenty cents to pay the fiddler. The weddings were great occasions. The girls married at home. Every member of the household—both black and white — worked for days getting ready. The food was prepared to eat and to serve as decoration for the table. "Stacked cakes" one upon another, placed on a graduated rack made for that purpose, and roasted pig with a bright red apple in its mouth, were favorite decorations.

John had married and was living on his farm nearby. As Sam Seward became older and crippled with rheumatism he depended upon John to help manage the farm and the livestock. George had become a prosperous merchant in Independence. Dighton was a dentist and had his office in the home. Betty had married Captain Tacitus Clay and lived nearby. Mary and Dighton were the only children at home.

Then came the Civil War and Dighton enlisted almost immediately. With a smile he told the entire household—black and white—good-by.

"Marg, what do you want me to bring you from the war?", he playfully asked the cook.

"A black silk dress," was the quick answer.

But Dighton did not return. He left his notebook in camp and went back after it. A sharp-shooter hit him.

"I know he would've brought me that silk dress if that 'Damed Yankee' hadn't got him," Marg declared with emphasis.

John and George were crippled with rheumatism to the extent that they could not enter the army. They helped care for the families in the neighborhood, and they did their part during the perilous days of reconstruction.

After the war the Sewards got an English couple who had been servants in England. The man acted as foreman for Mr. Seward, while his wife did most of the cooking. Mrs. Seward continued to bake cakes and unusual dishes. When they had unusual company Marg would bring dressed turkey and some jelly presumably "to help the missus." In reality she thought she could dress a turkey and make better jelly than "Missus's white help."

Captain Clay died and Betty came back home with her four small children. Then George's wife died, and Mrs. Seward took his two children to raise. George's infant daughter was the same age as Marg's baby girl. So Marg nursed them both until time to wean them.

Again the house sounded with the laughter of happy children. The six children loved each other as dearly as if they had been brothers and sisters. Mr. and Mrs. Seward had more time to give to them than they had to enjoy their own, for now they had financial security and a comfortable home.

Mr. Seward was not well and he passed away in 1870 and was buried in the family graveyard.

Mrs. Seward took charge of the place and directed the work through the overseer. She rode horseback frequently with

Tipped Horns Did the Damage

R. L. Cuff, regional manager (Kansas City) of National Livestock Loss Prevention Board, compares economic waste on four bruised carcasses with the good one in the center. These young cows came from South Texas. The loss on the load averaged $25 per head.

one of her grandchildren behind her. The grandchildren were her constant companions, but she was partial to the boys and always kept a supply of cookies for them.

"Why, Mrs. Seward, surely you don't leave your sugar on the table. I can't hide mine from the boys," one of the neighbors exclaimed one day when Mrs. Seward had filled the sugar bowl and left it on the table.

"I don't try to hide mine," replied Mrs. Seward. "I want to put it where they can get it when they want it."

Mrs. Seward and her widowed daughter Betty did the sewing after the slaves left. They whipped in the hems, then whipped the lace on the numerous ruffles of the voluminous petticoats. While the English servant woman was supposed to do the cooking, Mrs. Seward always made the biscuits for breakfast just as regularly each day as she read her Bible before going to sleep at night.

She fried doughnuts for supper the last night before she had a stroke, from which she passed away a few days later. This was in 1882, twelve years after the death of her husband. She passed as she had lived—cheerful and doing something for those she loved.

The immediate members of the Sam Seward family have long since answered the final roll call. But the descendants are today in the front of any progressive movement for the good of the community and for Texas. Clay Seward, a great grandson still owns part of the original 1,600-acre tract of land and lives in the house his grandfather, John Seward, built for his bride in 1854.

The Seward children were: John Hoblett Seward, married Laura Roberts; Betty, married Captain Tacitus Clay; Mary, married George Edward Fenner; George, married Louise Robertson; Isabella died when she was 13 and Dighton was killed during the Civil War.

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The 35 bulls offered in the two-day event made an average of $627 and the 186 females returned $372 per head. The top price of $7,900 was paid for WHR Jupiter Domino 110th, a son of Star Domino 6th that Owner W. L. Allen purchased in the WHR auction last fall for $4,500. The price was the second highest paid for a bull sold at auction since 1921 and was paid by Chester F. Kroger, Cincinnati, O., owner of Clovelly Farms, Madeira, Ohio. Mr. Kroger also topped the female section when he paid $1,575 for WHR Flashy Belle 3d, a four-year-old daughter of Onward Domino 20th.

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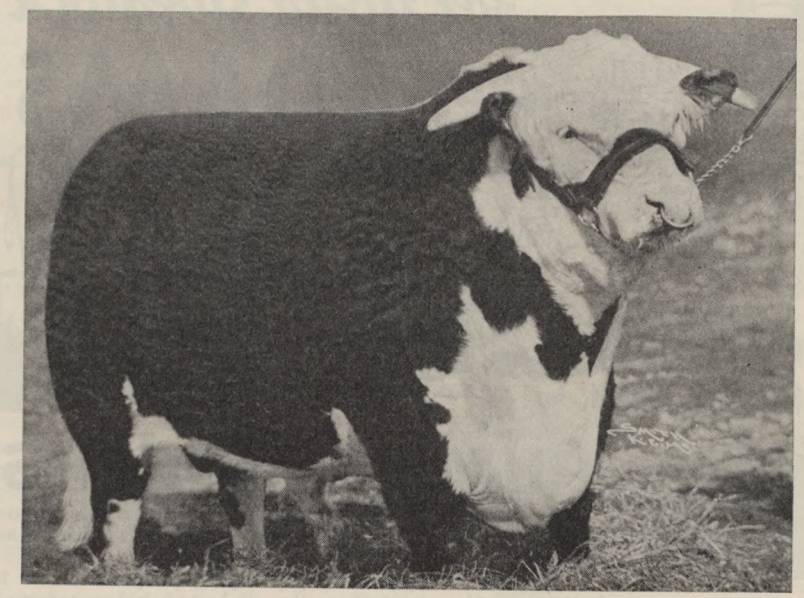

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